

The New Sleep: Stasis and the Image-Bound Environment

By Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo

Joseph Nechvatal: *Grace Under Pressure*

—In the pressure and splendor of its negations, Joseph Nechvatal's work quietly proposes that the act of Scrutiny must be equal in its power to the spectacle of commercialized Sleep (*Fig. 1*). Rendered in the graceful and intricate guise of signic entertainment, these acts of scrutiny, and their necessity, are effectively implied by the use of a gray, Renaissance or tatoo-like field or environment of super-statically charged images, generated by highly "over-worked" or congested patterns of information, seemingly contradictory in nature, which require the execution of discernment and judgment (*Fig. 2*). Scrutiny, here, must contend with this simulated grid of trans-social phenomena; in effect, measure itself against the gray (visual) noise of social and genetic disinformation and, finally, be equal in power to the spectacle of disengaged History. Scrutiny, in Nechvatal's view of things, must process, ultimately, the actuality of biological terrorism.

—While Nechvatal's pictures—drawings, photographic works, and video images (*Fig. 3*)—are stimulated by the excess distantiations of the body, which are driven mentally into micro-negations (or signic negations) in the weak temporality of existence, they also build a dark, hallucinatory techno-anterior synthetic (or a willfully obsolete or archaic anti-structure) that drives the onslaught of psychic references and sensations in their binary mode into a dense network of intentionality, desublimation, and scrutiny, a kind of Biosubjectivity that can surmount (or appropriate) the fast interiors of the New Sleep, and overwhelm the world of Naturalized Perceptions.



Fig. 1 Joseph Nechvatal, *Grace Under Pressure*, 1984. Gallery Nature Morte.

—Ultimately, Nechvatal is constructing in his work an abstract history, a disparate instrumentality, that can accommodate the images of the Subtended Psyche in pictures that categorically exhaust standardized consciousness and institutionalized perceptions.

Lily Lack: *Detergent*

—What Lily Lack does in *Sheila* (*Fig. 4*) and *This is My Life* (1984–85) is to break down the whole credibility factor.

—The credibility of the object is undercut by the institutional disarray of the product in *Sheila*, and the existential disarray of production in *This is My Life*.

—If attitude is neutral mystique, then Lily Lack's work sort of comes out on the other side. It's not that situation

overtakes attitude, it's that somehow you can gauge the specific atrophy involved in a social paradigm.

—It's not that you can get outside the role that detergent plays in your life, it's that you can temporarily deflect the aestheticization that serves to enhance its ontological roots.

—In a sense, she brackets the reification of the Social itself within an image-bound environment.

—The inevitable yield is a New Product.

—The signic negation of reification itself.

—The New Stasis.

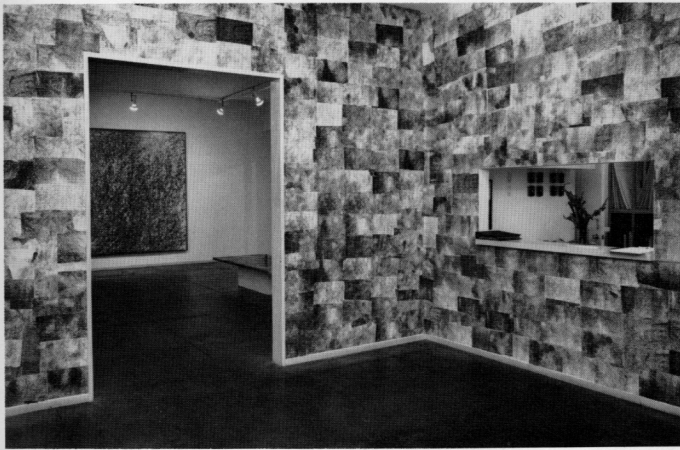


Fig. 2. Joseph Nechvatal, Installation, 1984, at Brooke Alexander, Inc.

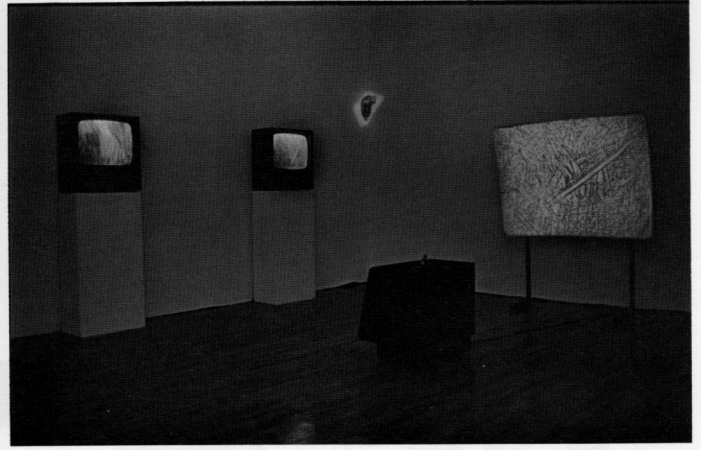


Fig. 3 Joseph Nechvatal, *When Things Get Tough on Easy Street*, Installation, 1982, at The Kitchen.

Gretchen Bender: *Total Effect—Neutralization and the Psychedelic Concept*

—Gretchen Bender's psychedelic hyper-appropriated image-bound environment—comprising visual, computer-generated, and video work—asserts a disparate instrumentality in the aesthetics of neutralized signs. The strategy situates Concept itself in the context of the New Content, endowing the effects with the power of theoretical scrutiny. In this regard, Bender's media-determined work indicates a neo-conceptual vector in the discourse regarding abstraction and technology (photo-mechanical reproduction).

—Although the militant, overriding concern in Bender's work seems—given such show titles as *Change Your Art* and *Public Vision*, and their subversive fervor—to underscore ironically the moral imperative hidden in part of this strategy (that is, in the ideological dimension or aggressive anti-proprietary values innate to the act of appropriation), the work actually distributes itself primarily into three inter-related zones of psychic passion: *information*, *interference*, and *abstraction*. In Bender's project, whole aesthetical systems (belonging to reality-incorporated or reality-complicit

artists such as Lichtenstein, Schnabel, and Haring) are self-reflexively rendered into *information bits*, which are then subjected meta-critically to a *theory of interference*, the patterns of which are subsequently transformed into *psychedelic abstraction*. Through the technological devices and various materials of photo-mechanical reproduction—such as video synthetical abstracts, computer and TV stills, and photo-silkscreened enamel on sign tin—and the arrangements of the resultant images into a calculated disarray of inferential patterns, the neutralization of signifying functions is, in a sense, intensified to produce the effect of a computer-generated *stridance* (a kind of hysterical semiotics), which brackets the aestheticized reality that operates as a support structure for the normative Spectacle.

—The first zone of psychic energy in Bender's work involves a bold technological appropriation of images from post-recent art and media in the exemplifying service of a hyper-neutralizing effect that is electric in distinction and absolute in its capacity to willfully access the overload and, in some ways, actually exceed it by analytically dismantling and ultimately subsuming the dominant signic totalities into transcendental bits of abstract information, which can then be arranged into a disparate paradigm of neutral systemic bits—"arrangements" that remain [Louise] Lawler-like, however, in their telling facticity. (Peter Nagy's xerox time-lines also participate radically in this strategy [Fig. 5].)

—In the second zone, this paradigm and its model run interference patterns over the image-content, such that the hyper-information of the pseudo-*Gesamtkunstwerk* produces meta-negative conceptual patterns. This new content (or manifest concept) in Bender's work is

virtually pornographic in the sheer number and visibility of distantiated relations it generates, which order the perception and transcendence of structure (itself), negating in the final analysis the "fascisms" of superstructural behaviorism, and issuing ultimately latent or abstract signs without directives or specific instructions. In the video *Reality Fever* (1983), Bender superimposes static (cliché) art images over moving programmed (generic) TV imagery. In superimposing the two (or more) art and media-derived systems and their codified meanings, she achieves a kind of higher (feverish) theatrical abstract neutrality which is attendant upon neither system in the end. This procedure of systemic interferences reveals surprising abstract continuities within the passage of these short-circuited images and codes whose meta-negative effects produce a powerful, synthetic sensation which perdures in consciousness as psychedelic conceptualism.

—In the third zone of psychic energy, this expansive or *Zeitgeist*-like sensation in Bender's work—operative in such video works as *Wild Dead II* (Fig. 6) and *Dumping Core* (Fig. 7)—manifests itself categorically in the concept's abstract (rather than structural) relation to psyche. Where we are forced, as we are in Bender, to think more abstractly, to perceive the structural patterns that govern the images, and to transcend structural awareness itself through the conceptual effect of neutral interferences, we are no longer dominated by the aestheticized content of the image.

—In Bender's image-bound environment, we are moving from the subversive manipulation of images and their counter-subversive neutralization to the trans-neutralization of signs.

—It is within this paradigm of neutral distinctions—magnified by the irony of



Fig. 4 Lily Lack, from *Sheila*, 1984 (Barbara Israel and Lily Lack in photograph).

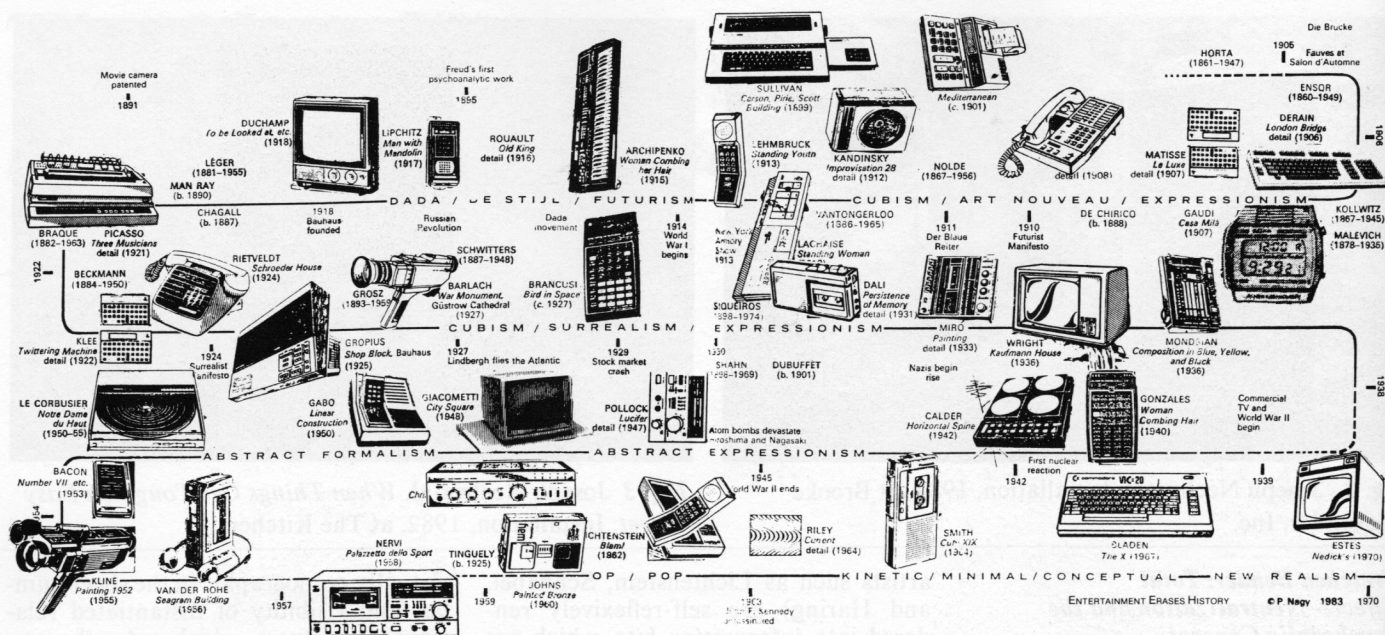


Fig. 5. Peter Nagy, *Entertainment Erases History*, 1983.

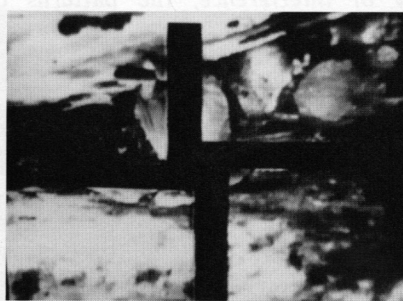


Fig. 6 Gretchen Bender, from *Wild Dead II*, 1984.

the New Scrutiny—that cause and causality itself undergo the abstract negations generated by the acute temporality of hyper-referential content whereby psyche (or the New Mind) informs concept with a pure (discausal) or psychedelic array of effectuations. These psychical expansions afford the sharp, constructive irony and abstract visibility of concept's strident neutrality as in *Mid-Effect Hold* (Fig. 8) and *Untitled* (from *The Pleasure is Back* series, 1982) (Fig. 9), even while they enact the most attenuated structural negations (as in the Mullican/Salle juxtaposition in *Mid-Effect Hold*), or they effect the widest, most comprehensive infra-environmental distribution of sensory content as in *Wild Dead III* (Fig. 10), or again, in *Reality Fever*. Ultimately, it is

this mode of psychedelic abstraction in Bender's work which facilitates concept's trans-neutralized relation to world (or direct) content and the abstract content of the psyche.

—These three zones of psychic energy in Bender's work constitute the abstract vector and critical motivation of psychedelic conceptualism in the aesthetics of neutralized signs whose perverse visibility effectively complicates Ian Wilson's (recent) classical formulation (in *Artforum* [February 1984]) of "non-visual abstraction" while simultaneously challenging the agon of individual temporality that characterizes the originary aesthetics of cult painting and cult expressionism in the various media. Within this para-zone of the Spectacle,

Bender's appropriating effects neutralize the image-aestheticization of temporality whereby we now consciously (willfully) experience the present as the History of the future. Where the psyche itself begins to operate like a 42nd street sign on Times Square, only a kind of temporary (provisional) Overmind can prevail in the blur.

Sara Hornbacher: *Torque Habit*

—In order for an image to bracket its existence within an image-bound environment, it must display an abstract torque in facts.

—It is like trying to find an effective way to curse in the culture.

—Otherwise, you just lean back, and swallow the Happy Language.

—Obviously, you must project the abstract decisions involved in constructing those "displays".

—It's like trying to measure a sphere with a straight-edge.

—In Sara Hornbacher's work, you experience the rational mediation of images optically as a kind of static dis-

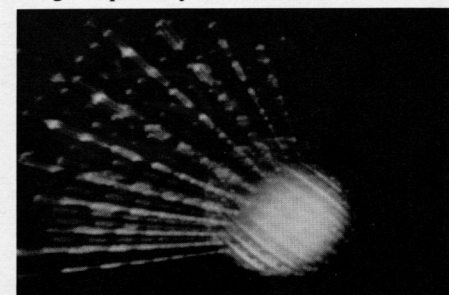


Fig. 7 Gretchen Bender, from *Dumping Core*, 1984–85, AT&T off TV, multi-monitor, multi-channel performance, at The Kitchen.



Fig. 8 Gretchen Bender, *Mid-Effect Hold*, 1983, color photo and enamel silkscreen on sign tin, 53 × 59". Gallery Nature Morte.

figuration of light. It becomes a kind of trapdoor to perception.

—Hornbacher's work—and the most effective video in general—is like the stuff between the TV stations.

—In this situation, facts sort of become the reified actuality of the categories you construct. *An American Sequence* (Fig. 11) literally brackets the narrative charge of these facts.

—As such, the images are really acute, even as they are placed at the behest of a kind of systematic break within their semantic value. They function like the "silverware" of temporality itself, and when you arrive at the center of this vast articulation, you get the feeling that you have been finally stopped.

—You begin to feel this optical guilt, and you become convinced that gravity is something like a static emergency.

—You mean it is as if Hornbacher has located your habit, and then broken it.

—And you come up with the idea—onto-technocratic delusion—maybe that meaning asserts the secret charm of that negation.

—The op breakdown is not about anything that is weak or deliberate in the image.

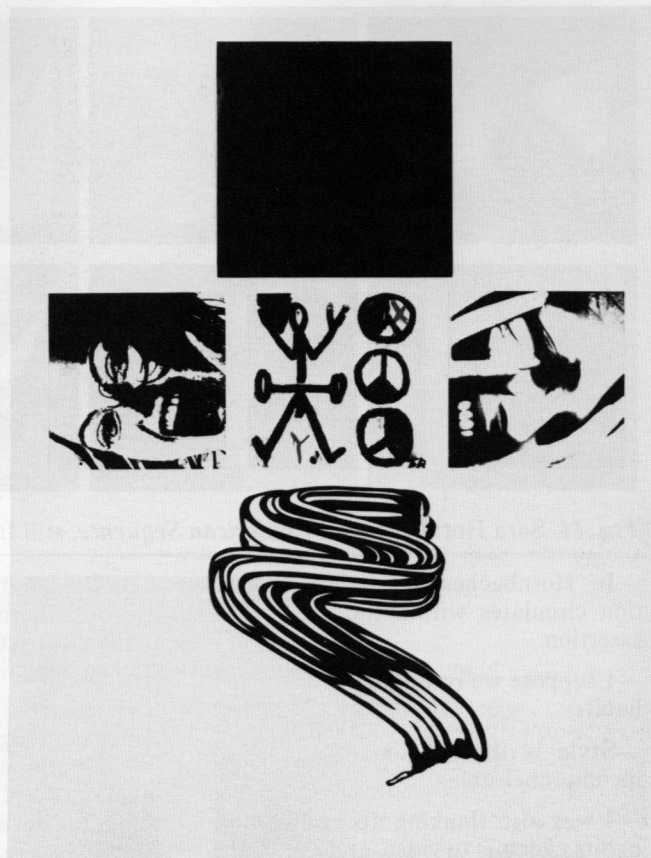


Fig. 9 Gretchen Bender, *Untitled* (from *The Pleasure is Back* series), 1982, photo silkscreen on sign tin, 6 × 7'. Gallery Nature Morte.

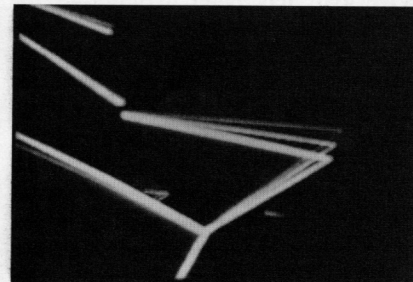
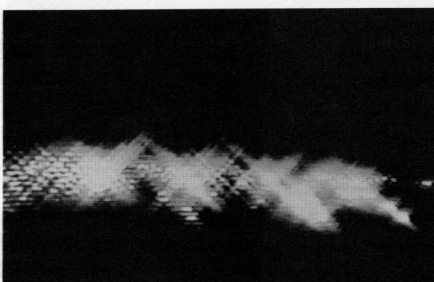
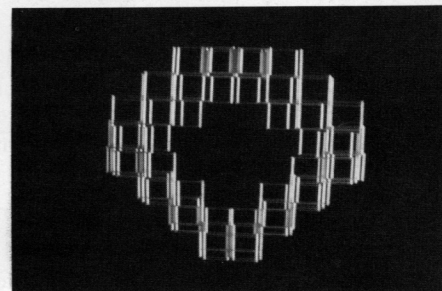
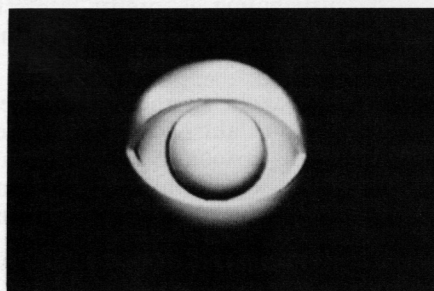


Fig. 10 Gretchen Bender, from *Wild Dead III*, 1984–85: "Glitter," from Japanese computer demo reel; "eagle," from Warhol's *Endangered Species* series; "white cross," from Apple computer graphics program; CBS logo, computer generated off TV; b & w abstract, programmed off a 3D animating computer—distortion of x, y, and z axis.

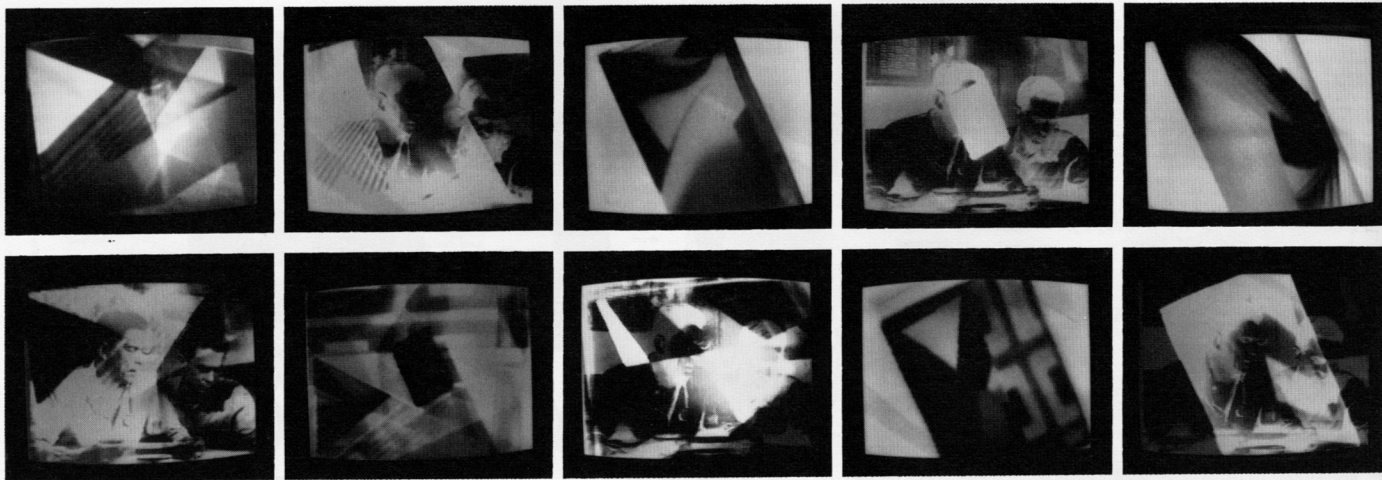


Fig. 11 Sara Hornbacher, *An American Sequence*, still from 7-minute video.

—In Hornbacher, the crisis in negation circulates within the economy of assertion.

—I suppose we're talking about optical habits.

—Style is the religion of the super-incomprehensible.

—I was also thinking about the moral habits endemic to video, and the strange neo-humanistic formalism to which it has always ultimately succumbed.

—A kind of technological "Right," which is categorically expelled from Hornbacher's work.

—It is the formalism of correct positions inhabited by the fauna and flora of technology that must bear the pressure of an intentionally artificial dialectic in her work.

—Scrutiny is the optical style implicit in a disparate instrumentality.

—So what you get in Hornbacher is the generic deprivation of images, and, at the same time, the feeling that the Overload has been articulated by the negations effected through this instrumentality.

—In Hornbacher, Concept is catching up to content, and this prevents the instrumentality from becoming an empty formalism.

—So the habit is replaced by Hypothesis—hypothesis construed by the senses as the electric(al) spirituality of a New kitchen appliance.

—Hornbacher's work summarizes the visual tautology involved in perception. It's something like the need to wear sunglasses while you run as fast as you can in the dark.

Paul Nichols: Transcendental Stasis

—We all want to be winners.

—It's the transcendental mode.

—The distribution is pretty interesting—very American—game shows and assassinations.

—The cultural clichés and appropriated ad elements in Paul Nichols's work set up a kind of cartoonish synthesis—an image-bound environment—that enables us to look at the apparently arbitrary nature of the transcendental.

—So Nichols's work examines the structure of idealism, its hysterical content and categorical façade.

—Now it's like saying that the structure of idealism is out of control, or looks something like the crisis topography in catastrophe theory.

—So that must mean that there are such things as transcendental catastrophes that possess very specific topographies.

—You get that feeling when you look at the cuts in Nichols's *Hysteria* (Fig. 12) or the wave-structure in *Two People* (Fig. 13) or the serial arbitration in *A Day in the Life Of* (1982).

—The typography of structural negation in Nichols yields a kind of a transcendental stasis.

—Something like a random gain in the Downfall.

—Auspicious mania.

—I'd call it looking good on your way out.

Tricia Collins and Richard Milazzo have worked collaboratively since 1982. They are the publishers of *Effects: Magazine for New Art Theory*, and the American editors of *Kunstforum (Cologne)*. Collins and Milazzo have curated shows at *Nature Morte*, *International with Monument*, *Cash/Newhouse*, *White Columns*, *Tibor De Nagy*, *Diane Brown*, and *Margo Leavin Gallery* (in Los Angeles), among others. They are currently preparing shows at *S.L. Simpson Gallery* in Toronto, *American Fine Arts Co.* in New York, and *Lia Rumma Gallery* in Naples, Italy.



Fig. 12 Paul Nichols, *Hysteria*, 1984.



Fig. 13 Paul Nichols, *Two People*, 1983.

